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## Gelitin's Blind Sculpture - a diary

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Gelitin, *Blind Sculpture*, Performance View, Greene Naftali Gallery, 2010, Image Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York, Photo Credit Martha Fleming-Ives

by **Joshua Mack**

Gelitin: *Blind Sculpture*, a *Happening* by Gelitin with a little help of their friends.  
Greene Naftali Gallery  
28 January - 27 February

Written by the artists, the press release for Gelitin's unfolding act of on site creation at Greene Naftali is a model of terseness. It's clunky humor comes from German turned stiff in translation; a piece of biting, self-deprecating wit. It reads:

*Gelitin will build a big sculpture.*

*At the opening they will be working all evening on the sculpture.*

*The following 10 days they will be working on the sculpture in the afternoons, early evenings.*

*The visitors can watch the happening of the sculpture.*

*Gelitin will be working on the sculpture blindfolded.*

*Working blindfolded is never a sensation, it is just a fact.*

*They will never see the sculpture until it is finished. The sculpture will stay for the rest of the show.*

*Gelitin will be assisted by very very professional assistants who hand them ideas, nails, tape, glue, conversation, things, guide them to the ladder and hold the scaffolding.*

*Come see this show. Tell your mother about it and please bring your friends.*

#### **Thursday 28 January**

The very very professional assistants to whom Gelitin refers include a posse of downtown artists, a selection pitch-perfect in its mix of the famous with the known-only-to-the-cool, and the minimal and conceptual with the overly baroque. They range from David LaChapelle, Urs Fischer, Cecily Brown and Amy Sillman to K8 Hardy, Rainer Ganahl, Slava Mogutin and Jutta Koether. If the choices veer a little too much to the cool, in the sense of the artworld as a party, that's part of the point. Working blindfolded with a group of friends turns the performance into a festive game, a pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey pursuit, which sends up ideas of authorship and authenticity, skewers the sanctity of the creative urge and pokes fun at the idea of fame and authority behind the classification 'very very professional assistants'. And in one way or another, many of these artists – K8 Hardy, for example – embrace some aspect of art and/or life as a messy, often libido-driven circus, mixed with a high dose of biting wit.

Not that any of this appeared obvious as the piece got under way in the gallery – which had been set up as a kind of theatre, with chairs on plywood platforms forming a U around a makeshift studio – last Thursday. At 6.00 pm, the artists, who had been sitting at a round wooden table in the centre of the gallery drinking Fiji Water and Maker's Mark Bourbon, left the scene.



Gelitin, *Blind Sculpture*, Performance View, Greene Naftali Gallery, 2010, Image Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York, Photo Credit Daniel Durtsche

A few minutes later they were led back in, blindfolded and in various stages of travesty and semi-nudity. Assisted by four artists, they began to hammer and cut, drill and tape together two-by-fours, odd chair legs and cardboard tubes. Amy Sillman and Cecily Brown, dressed in a workmanlike blue dress and paint-splattered overalls respectively, searched for materials on the shelving forming the fourth wall of the scene with an earnestness at the opposite end of the spectrum from the stiletto heels and butt-bearing costumes Gelitin sported.

As they rummaged amongst rolls of fabric, bins of coloured ribbons and many-hued spools of thread and twine, plastic bags stuffed with plush animals, lengths of two-by-fours, spray paint, glue and power tools among the other essentials of Gelitin's production, they occasionally disturbed a small, nervous, dog asleep under a quilt on one of the shelves. It yipped angrily at being disturbed until Salvatore, Gelitin's sidekick, paraded it around the gallery floor. A dude in an orange mechanics suit played an upright piano.

Early on, a sparse crowd sat listlessly, drinking wine distributed by gallery assistants, watching this cross between cabaret and car wreck, Dada performance and Vienna Aktionismus. Referring to the amount of personal flesh revealed by the drooping long underwear bottoms, hot pants and jockey shorts Gelitin and Salvatore were wearing, a friend noted: “Too little information is not their motto.”

But by 7:15, the room was crammed with visitors. The hum of their conversation and the ready availability of drink surrounded the ‘studio’ in a galvanizing buzz. The erstwhile clumsy and spare foundations of tubing and wood, chrome coat rack and two-by-fours fleshed out. The stiletto heels and ass crack onstage seemed a bit less awful. When I left at 7:30, there was a line in the lobby for the elevator. It stretched out the door and into the dark, bitterly cold evening.



Gelitin, *Blind Sculpture*, Performance View, Greene Naftali Gallery, 2010, Image Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York, Photo Credit Daniel Durtsche

### Friday 29 January

By Friday at 5:45 pm the place is a glorious mess. The piano player is half undressed, playing with a wool hat pulled down over his eyes. Grey masses of papier-mâché lie strewn across the floor. The sculptures have blossomed with drooping yarn, blue scarves, and swags of orange fabric. Painted styrofoam blocks have been added to the base of the coat rack. A wreath of fake flowers and plastic palm fronds, a gift of “Cerith” delivered earlier in the day, stood among the expanding creations. I could do without the plastic lobster tucked into one, but they have a madcap vigour to them.

The Gelitin guys are rubbed with paint. A fresh bottle of bourbon, Bullet instead of yesterday’s Maker’s Mark, stands half-finished on the table. The costumes are as silly. Ali has pulled up his long underwear and his ass is thankfully covered. Everything has the look and feel of a party that had lasted all night, the kind of languor one often feels at the end of a really cold day in New York.

As haphazard as the installation might seem, the guys are asking really specific questions about the location of pipes, sprinklers, pillars and seating in the gallery, and are deeply engaged in discussion with their helpers. Ali, of the sagging underwear bottoms – is discussing the angles and colour of a sawn and spray-painted styrofoam held between his hands. Salvatore brings Florian – he is the skinniest of the lot, going around in pair of wool hot pants, a pair of black stiletto sandals. They match the feathers and black paint caked on the soles of his feet.

Visitors wander in, sit, chat with friends, text, email, and leave. Everyone seemed to be having a great time as the four structures, now linked by string and chains of plastic ties to the pillars and pipes, go back and forth between sloppy excess and serendipitous moments of beauty.





Gelitin, *Blind Sculpture*, Performance View, Greene Naftali Gallery, 2010, Image Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York, Photo Copyright Paula Court

## Tuesday 2 February

The thing looks like a moment of tumult in a circus caught in freeze-frame. Spools of thread define a wonky arch from one upright to another. White polyester bound to three standing elements makes a kind of tent, or chuppah, the big top in the centre of the one-ring carnival. Florian, in his hot pants, a necklace of fake gold beads and even tackier black stiletto sandals, is stuffing a red-and-white-striped costume with styrofoam. It hangs upside down, and as the afternoon progresses, he slathers it with plaster which Jim Drain, one of the day's assistants, helps him mix in a bucket.

Schuyler, the piano player, is curled in a fetal position on the piano bench, his legs towards the ceiling. Casey Spooner, the singer, another helper – the others are Mike Smith, Slava Mogutin (very tame compared to his erotic photos) and Adam McEwen – wanders aimlessly about wearing a kid's tiger costume from some past Halloween across his back like Hercules sporting the skin of the Nemean Lion. On the table, one bottle of Bullett is finished and a second is well on its way.



Gelitin, *Blind Sculpture*, Performance View, Greene Naftali Gallery, 2010, Image Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York, Photo Copyright Paula Court

There are really rough sketches taped to the structural columns that define the edges of the 'studio'. Shapes of spools, say, or styrofoam blocks, or the general rhythm of pileup are discernible, as if the artists are trying to follow what they're doing, or to chart their improvisation; although it's hard to tell really, because according to Carol Greene, some were done blindfolded. Carol, and the rest of the staff, move back and forth from the gallery to the office, chatting with friends and pointing out various

elements of the piece. Casey forsakes his tiger for red high heels with bows on the toes. A visitor screams, "Florian, I love you." The pianist turns the line into a chant, repeating it like a broken record but keying up the desperate cadence and thick Brooklyn accent of the original into a howling satire. The viewers clap.

By 5:15 the bourbon is gone and so it goes on..



Gelitin, *Blind Sculpture*, Performance View, Greene Naftali Gallery, 2010, Image Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York, Photo Copyright Paula Court

### Friday 5 February

At 5:45ish my friend Daisy and I arrive just as Florian is trying to piss into a jar. As he gropes and tugs at his fly, trying to thread his dick into the mouth of the glass receptacle, K8 Hardy directs him while covering her eyes. I look away, but Daisy sees what he's got and does not like it.

The installation has spread upward and outward. It resembles a John Bock on acid. There's a stuffed tiger slathered with red paint and a goofy papier mâché face with a gaping maw and a huge eye in the shape of a button. Stuffed clothing and networks of wood seem to burst out everywhere. The atmosphere in the room, however, is subdued, like a late-night party when everyone is overtired. Ali is sitting and talking. Wolfgang cuts fabric. Everyone is covered with a paint and plaster as if they had been rolling in it. Someone drags in a barrow of stuffed animals sodden with paint. I think, for a minute, it's a vat of raw meat.



Gelitin, *Blind Sculpture*, Performance View, Greene Naftali Gallery, 2010, Image Courtesy Greene Naftali, New York, Photo Copyright Paula Court

Ali has shed his long underwear for a loincloth to which a shock of black wig is attached. Schuyler plays the guitar. The music reminds me that at midnight on Saturdays in the 1970s, all the rock stations would

switch over to Pink Floyd. Then a crasher wearing a papier mâché zombie head with a painted oval mouth and a cork nose tries to enter the scene pushing a broom headed by a splayed monkey plush toy. Salvatore blocks him with a stuffed moose atop a cardboard tube.

Worse, a troupe of six tap dancers and two 'patriots' – guys in American Flag print jackets – barge in, clacking away while photographers they have brought take copious snapshots. "Everyone wants their fucking photo op", Daisy says. The scene has devolved to a display of desperation and nonsense.

## Saturday 6 February

What's here is raw, anything-goes energy and creativity. There's hardly any floor space left. Two towers of cardboard boxes taped together list near the back wall of the makeshift studio. The table where at the artists had taken breaks is covered with an assortment of bric-a-brac - a chair, a stuffed moose - wrapped in torn pieces of red, yellow, orange, and light blue cloth. A donkey-like sculpture has been cobbled together from cartons, painted white, and topped it with a massive papier-mâché hard-on.

Everyone seems in a rush to use everything before 7pm: the planned end of the happening. John Kessler hurries to mix plaster, pouring in bottles of San Pellegrino. Florian decides to cut a hole in the platform around the scene, and carves off uneven pieces of wood with an electric hand saw. Two kids are running around playing with electric drills.

Suddenly, at 6:55, five minutes before the planned finish, Schuyler stops playing the piano. Florian stands up and gently lifts his blindfold. As if on cue, the other guys do the same. Now that his eyes are visible, Ali, who has a graying beard and mustache, resembles a stuffed animal, a walrus. He turns his head like a child suddenly transported into a carnival of candy and cakes, stunned and amazed. Wolfgang and Tobias wander around silently.

They seem, for the first time, whole people, fully revealed. The act of removing the blindfolds is far more intimate than all the nudity and public urination. All division between artist and audience vanishes: we are all seeing the completed sculpture and each other for the first time and at the same moment. Whereas the artist is usually the one to see a work in progress, and the audience the ones who see it revealed on completion, this happening reversed the equation, mixing up the traditional power relation between creator and consumer building a community of participation and experience for those who came to work or to see.

It's surprising that with the exception of a few kids, no one in the audience made an effort to jump in. Certainly the table, until it was subsumed into the physical mass of the piece, provided an invitation to sit and chat, eat pretzels, and drink. And the very use of the term 'happening' to define the performance suggests, as per Allan Kaprow, the term's originator, that audience involvement was crucial to the work's identity. That only a few friends of the artists showed up to sit there, suggests how uptight New Yorkers can be, and comments broadly on the deep social boundary between artist and viewer and the perceived sanctity of the creative act. It also hints at how off putting Gelitin's antics might have been. The possibility that the audience could have joined in also suggests that the performance could have gone in other directions. An interpreter at Tino Sehgal's last show at Marian Goodman told me – after the fact – that engaging with audience members required taking the risk of being rebuffed. Gelitin's piece, offered the possibility of participation, along with this same risk.

Before returning to Vienna Gelatin removed the bleachers surrounding the piece and separated out particular elements as stand alone works. The penis-topped donkey with swags of cut carpet drooping around it. The table festooned with the piss receptacles, which turn out to be old drinking cup dispensers. The taped-together cardboard boxes that Florian shoved into the hole he cut in the platform. It curves forward and then back with a classical elegance that recalls the Nike of Samothrace. No wonder it was created when Gedi Sibony was around.

The central mass of the construction, which remains in situ, is visually unified by the rhythm of verticals moderated by curving horizontals, the play of bright colors and white plaster. From certain angles it seems wantonly dense. From others it arcs and sags, rises and curves with lyrical energy. Surrounded by scattered paper, paint splatters, and broken tiles, it is clearly the result of some process, but it doesn't read as the relic of a performance per se.

Absent from the crew and the confinement of the bleachers, the piece loses the intensity and density it had late in the process. But that change is part of why the other sculptures begin to function as stand-alone works – they are not beholden to the process of their making. That anything in the least bit beautiful arose from the blindfolded antics also challenges assumptions about how much agency, intention, and sight are involved in creating art.

However, the sameness of Gelitin's various transgressions – the nudity, the travesty – suggest they hew to organizing dictums, whilst also underscoring their reliance on silly, if not adolescent jokes. There are boxes of Jello stuck here and there and a flyer reading Gelatin Sucks collaged somewhere. Phallic elements are everywhere. The cock on the donkey's back spouts a plastic arc. This all becomes tiresome quickly.

Additionally, in places the mottled and painted plaster comes too close to Franz West – whose aesthetic and attitude seems be the paternal force behind the whole enterprise.

But if this humor and these similarities make it hard to take the works, and the happening, seriously,

what makes us think we should be doing that? Why do we always expect seriousness, or even art, as if we, as we, as viewers are owed that.

Instead, it's Gelitin who make demands on us, sticking their asses in our faces. It's up to us how we react. Hang out, enjoy the party, or leave. They seemed to be having fun, and if we're not, what's the point of staying?

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